DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 384 055 CS 214 912

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TITLE Critical Choices for the Future of the First-Year College Writing: What Are the Stakes of This Controversy for Instructors and Students.
PUB DATE 24 Mar 95
NOTE 8p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (46th, Washington, DC, March 23-25, 1995).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS English Curriculum; *English Departments; *Freshman Composition; *Higher Education; Politics; Writing Teachers
IDENTIFIERS Departmental Politics; *Educational Issues; Faculty Attitudes; Historical Background

ABSTRACT

Even a quick tour through the professional literature of composition and rhetoric reveals that the profession has failed to bring about any real change in first-year college composition. The truth is that today the political and material conditions of first-year composition programs are not much different from that they were over a half century ago. Course loads have not become lighter and budgets have not become heavier. The point of this essay is not to dismiss a half century of dedicated and sincere efforts to rescue the system but rather to argue that perpetuating the status quo holds enormous, largely negative implications for both instructors and students. It may be that the discipline's efforts to rescue the current system has allowed it to remain firmly entrenched. Focusing on the composition class keeps the discipline invested in the current system and prevents it from reconceptualizing pedagogies and programs in literate practices. The discipline must abandon the current system in favor of one that: (1) would give the discipline a better chance of raising the status of writing instruction; and (2) would instruct students in the complexities and richness of literate practices as they occur in a variety of situations and for a variety of purposes. (Contains 32 references.) (TB)

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Critical choices for the Future of First-Year College Writing: What are the Stakes of This Controversy for Instructors and Students

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Paper prepared for
1995 CCCC Washington, D.C.
March 24, 1995

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Almost thirty years ago, Leonard Greenbaum and Rudolf Schmerl (1967) argued:

> In order for freshman composition to improve, it has got to be taken seriously as a learning experience, and that means innovation, experimentation, change. It means expenditures in time and money—it may even mean that the *status quo* is expendable. (p. 152)

Even a quick tour through our professional literature reveals that although we have long dabbled in *innovation* and *experimentation*, we have failed to bring about any real *change* in first-year college composition. This failure is made clear when we recognize that the problems that led to the formation of the CCCC nearly fifty years ago have not been resolved.

The CCCC emerged largely for political and material reasons. As Gordon Wilson (1967) explained, "aggrieved by the discrepancy between our status and our function, and impelled by our interest, we set out to change things: to shape programs and textbooks, to lighten loads and to make the budgets heavier" (p. 128; also see, e.g., Archer, 1955; Gerber, 1952, 1956; Hook, 1955).

The truth is that today the political and material conditions of first-year composition programs are not much different than they were over a half century ago. Course loads have not been lightened and budgets have not become heavier; most English departments still rely on an underpaid, overworked, exploited class of part-time instructors and graduate students (Moglen, 1988; Robertson, Crowley, & Lentricchia, 1987; Robertson, & Slevin, 1987; Wyche-Smith & Rose, 1990).

Carol Hartzog's (1986) study and, more recently, Richard Larson's (1994) survey reveal that research and scholarship in rhetoric and composition have had little to no impact on program design and administration. And as Gary Tate (1995) notes in the most recent

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issue of *College English* what Larson found is not all that different from what Albert Kitzhaber found in his 1959 survey of first-year programs. Such research suggests that local institutional and departmental politics play far stronger roles in the shape of such programs than do disciplinary influences.

Textbooks have also remained, by and large, stubbornly the same (Berlin, 1982; Hamilton-Wieler, 1988; Stewart, 1978; Welch, 1987).[1] Sharon Crowley (1986) made this point most forcefully when she wrote: "To read through Freshman English textbooks of any era is to journey through a dreary wasteland marked by the same ill-conceived pillars of wisdom, which are repackaged rather than re-thought when some new intellectual fad requires their surface conformity to its configurations" (p. 11).[2]

The persistence of ineffectual textbooks and the persistence of poor material and political conditions draw attention to the fact that despite decades of scholarly focus on first-year composition, the institution has not been changed in any substantial or wide-scale way. Instead of systemic changes, it has been treated to a number of superficial ones, like so many layers of paint being applied to a crumbling building.

My purpose here is not to dismiss a half century of dedicated and sincere efforts to rescue the system but rather my goal is to argue that perpetuating the *status quo* holds enormous, and largely negative, implications for both instructors and students. And further I want to suggest that it may ironically be our very efforts to rescue, rather than demolish, the system that have permitted it to remain so firmly entrenched in our academic institutions (Goggin, in press). Focusing our inquiry on the composition class helps to keep us invested in the present system however ill-conceived it may be. Such investment blinds us to the systemic problems, and thus, prevents us from reconceptualizing pedagogies and programs in literate practices. As Kenneth Burke (1966) taught us, "a way of seeing is also a way of not seeing" (p. 44).

But our question to day is: What are the stakes for instructors and students?

The current system not only authorizes but ultimately depends on the exploitation of tens of thousands of adjunct instructors and teaching assistants who are offered little security and even fewer benefits. Efforts to improve the status and treatment of these troops--such as the Wyoming resolution--have had little to no impact (Robertson, Crowley, & Lentricchia, 1987; Robertson, & Slevin, 1987; Wyche-Smith & Rose, 1990). The reasons are no doubt complex but they draw attention to the impotence of this field, an impotence that is manifested in its continuing fight against marginalization.

For students, the current system may do little harm but there is little evidence that it is of great benefit. I agree with David Russell's (1993) argument that "after more than a century of search for a method, a conceptual scheme, there have been no knock-down successes, no dramatic break-throughs, not even any noticeable let-up in the complaints about poor student writing. It might be useful to call off the search" (p. 195). Similarly, Sharon Crowley has argued for abandoning the requirement of first-year composition in favor of a range of elective courses in rhetoric and writing (Connors, 1993; Schilb, 1994). Her position calls for transforming the enterprise of writing instruction so that it emerges out of and is integral to the discipline of rhetoric and composition.[3]

We need only look at composition textbooks to see how far we are from what Sharon Crowley proposes. Thomas Kuhn (1970) and Stephen Toulmin (1972) have both noted that textbooks are supposed to promote and infuse disciplinary perspectives, values, methods, and discourses. That textbooks, as Crowley (1986) argues, have largely been "repackaged" rather than "re-thought" underscores the unique problem at the heart of our disciplinary efforts. Unlike other disciplines, where the introductory undergraduate courses serve to acquaint students with the disciplinary ways of knowing, first-year composition has been grounded in a mechanical literacy that has virtually nothing to do with the aims of rhetoric and composition (Crowley, 1986).

I want to make it clear that I am not advocating that we abandon the teaching of literate practices. In fact, I am arguing just the opposite. What I am suggesting is that we

abandon the system we inherited over a hundred years ago in favor of a disciplinary or rhetorical one that would 1) give us a better chance of professionalizing and raise the status of writing instruction, and 2) would instruct students in the complexities and richness of literate practices as they occur in a variety of situations and for a variety of purposes. That is, I am suggesting that we teach our discipline as a way of knowing. What I am finally suggesting is that we let our pedagogy emerge out of our discipline rather than let our discipline be ruled by an ill-conceived pedagogical structure. To put it another way, I am advocating that we put down the paintbrush and take up the sledge hammer.

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Notes

[1]It is not that all textbooks are uniformly atheoretical; clearly, they are not. There have been textbooks that have tried to promote a radically new view of composition. See, for example, Young, Becker, & Pike's (1970) ***Rhetoric: Discovery and Change*** and Corbett's (1965)***Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student***. But these have been rare. Many represent variations on rhetorical themes that have been in vogue on and off since the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Berlin, 1982, 1984, 1987).

[2]What W. Nelson Francis (1953) wrote about the condition of textbooks over forty years ago remains virtually true today:

> In no reputable academic discipline is the gap between the pioneers of research and the pedagogical rank and file more shockingly great…[textbooks] continue to put forward for the instruction of innocent freshmen a hodgepodge of facts, theories, and prescriptions most of which are from fifty to two hundred years behind the findings of linguistic science. (p. 329)

Textbooks are controlled by political and economic forces of the marketplace (Winterowd 1987).

[3]These ***new abolitionists'*** calls (as Connors, 1993, has termed them) are not new but join in a long tradition. See, for example, Greenbaum (1969), Russell (1991) and Rice (1960).